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ABSTRACT

This fastback document presents the results of an opinion survey of middle-school students, parents, and teachers in South Carolina. Because no surveys in the literature had combined responses from these three groups, researchers asked 4,940 students, 735 teachers, and 2,576 parents about their attitudes toward school, students, and teachers. The results show that all three groups held significantly different opinions about school climate, about students, and about teachers. These different opinions were also evident within the groups themselves, with female and male students, for example, holding significantly different views on all items. The responses also revealed that the organization and management of schools made more sense to parents and teachers than it did to students. In fact, many students failed to see what relevance school had for them, and this pointed to a discrepancy between teachers and students, suggesting a poor working relationship. These findings indicate that schools should make a whole-school commitment to becoming student-oriented by developing prevention programs, by viewing students as consumers, by encouraging family participation, by using peer mentoring, by making schools smaller, and by challenging gender stereotypes. Teachers should also work on self-awareness, should strive to make learning relevant, should recognize individuality, and should practice collegiality. (Contains 39 references.) (RJM)

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Joshua M. Gold
Joseph C. Rotter
George R. Holmes
Patricia S. Motes

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by
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and
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Introduction

We are experimenting with the lives of early adolescents as we continuously reconfigure our schools to accommodate this defined, yet often maligned, age group. Should we organize and operate according to an elementary school model, or should we configure and operate like a high school? Is there a unique approach for the middle school?

Too often educators focus on organization and ignore the child. Few attempts have been made to inquire what teachers think, and even fewer studies have included students' and parents' attitudes about these schools in the middle. Nowhere in the literature is there a survey that combines responses from teachers, students, and parents.

This fastback reports on an opinion survey of more than 4,500 middle school students, some 725 teachers, and more than 1,800 parents. The survey used a semantic differential scale to learn their opinions with regard to school, students, and teachers. Using the survey results, we offer a number of suggestions to improve the climate of the middle school.

The Problem

The existence of a "middle" school implies a sense of transition between the childhood of elementary school and the adolescent responsibilities of high school. Despite the unique dynamics of middle schools, few studies have focused on this population (Urdan, Midgley, and Wood 1995). This omission has led to ignoring the developmental needs of this student population in calls for education reform (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). Therefore it seemed clear to us that such a study could be highly useful.

Our study of school climate is based on the hypothesis that a student's success in school is linked to that student's perception of the school environment (Dietrich and Bailey 1996). A number of studies support this assertion and repeatedly tie differing measures of school success to distinct components of school climate (Goodenow and Grady 1995; Peterson 1997; Seidman et al. 1994). If the factors that promote a higher quality of school life can be defined, then teachers and administrators will be better able to focus their energies in those directions. The factors that predict a positive school climate also have been shown to vary, depending on

whether the setting is an elementary, middle, or high school.

Previous studies support the relationship between perception of middle school climate and school performance. Killin and Williams (1995) assert that teachers' perception of students is predictive of student self-esteem and that school climate has a negative relationship with school violence and a positive relationship with student learning outcomes. Roeser, Midgley and Urdan (1996) found that adolescents' views of school became the reality on which their responses were founded. The sample reported preferences for interactions with "nonjudgmental adults," recognition of individual strengths instead of comparison to one standard of performance or behavior, and acceptance of student differences by the adult populations of the school. Sabo (1995) described the middle school as an environment that needed to acknowledge young adolescents' needs for socialization, companionship, acceptance by adults, and expression of independence and creativity. Goodenow (1993) added the qualities of belonging, relatedness, and adult support to the expectations of adolescents; and Tarter, Sabo, and Hoy (1995) identified the issues of perceived supportiveness and trust as predictive of a positive middle school climate. Ozvold (1996) tested these findings through purposeful adaptation of her own attitudes in her middle school English classroom and facilitated positive change in the students' classroom behavior and academic achievement.

Previous studies on middle school climate also have taken a decidedly linear approach to the issues by con-

centrating on one specific group of respondents, usually teachers. This type of study implies that teachers have the most influence over the development of school climate. While previous studies have focused on teachers (and to a lesser extent on students), all have overlooked the views of parents.

School climate more recently has been conceptualized as members' shared perceptions of the environment (ASCA 1996; Hernandez-Gantes et al. 1995; Sabo 1995; Sheets 1996). However, this hypothesis of shared perceptions by the school populations was disputed by Nusser and Haller (1995), who found that students and faculty differed significantly in their perceptions of school climate. Kennedy (1995) also noted significant differences of opinion between classroom teachers and students and between male and female respondents.

Given these starting points, we decided to study the attitudes of three groups: 4,940 students, 735 teachers, and 2,576 parents. In emphasizing the shared perceptions of these three groups, our study response supports a recursive, or contextual, view of school climate (Gold and Burggraf 1998). This view suggests that the attitudes of teachers, parents, and students are in a state of continuous, mutual influence and that conflicting issues of school climate arise when the members of the three groups hold different attitudes toward the same concern.

For example, if students see the school day as more boring than do their teachers, they will try to "enliven" their school day, usually to the dismay of the teachers. In response the teacher may act to enforce school rules and perhaps punish those who "misbehaved." In this

type of scenario, teachers and students disagree on what is interesting (or boring) in school, whether students are respectful or disobedient, and whether the teachers are strict or fair. When the attitudes of the parents are considered, all three groups may disagree. Should the parents side with the teachers, students, or hold distinct views of their own, the conflict continues and school climate suffers.

The Study

The participants in this study were middle school students, their teachers, and their parents in 11 schools in 11 South Carolina school districts. Each participant responded to a 19-item survey that focused on his or her attitude toward school, students, and teachers. The items were presented in a semantic differential format using a 6-point Likert scale. Nine items were worded in the positive direction, and 10 in the negative. Participants rated the following characteristics of the school:

- Organized/disorganized
- Peaceful/violent
- Fresh/stale
- Fast/slow
- Interesting/boring
- Flexible/rigid
- Comfortable/uncomfortable

They rated the following characteristics with regard to students:

- Interested/bored
- Active/passive
- Attentive/distracted

- Busy/idle
- Smart/slow
- Friendly/hostile

They rated the following characteristics with regard to teachers:

- Interested/bored
- Active/passive
- Easy/strict
- Fair/unfair
- Caring/uncaring
- Strong/weak

Based on the assertion that satisfaction with school climate reflected consensus among school constituencies, the data analysis questioned how consistent the opinions of participants were. The data generated one between-group analysis of difference, revealing that the perceptions of the three groups (students, teachers, and parents) differed significantly on all scales. The data also offered multiple within-group analyses, supported by a study by Sheets (1996).

Students were divided by gender (n=2,490 males; 2,450 females), ethnicity (African American n=2,100; Asian/Pacific Islander n=45; Hispanic n=45; Native American n=30; White n=2,700; Other n=20), and grades (A/B n=2,490 and D/F n=245), again generating significant differences between groups in their opinions of the school.

Teachers were grouped according to years of teaching experience (0-10 years n= 283; 11-20 years n=227;

21-30 years n=205; and 31+ years n=20), years in the same school (0-10 years n=515; 11-20 years n=172; 21-30 years n=48), and ethnicity (African American n=240, White n=495), all three variables having significant influences on teacher attitudes.

Parents were grouped only by ethnicity (African American n=485; Asian/Pacific Islander n=39; Hispanic n=68; Native American n=33; White n=1,174; Other n=42), with this variable also differentiating attitudes toward school, students, and teachers.

The Results

The first analysis addressed how consistently students, teachers, and parents responded to the survey items. In terms of their opinions of the school climate, all three groups held significantly different ($p<.01$) opinions from the other groups; in other words, the students did not agree with the teachers or their parents, who, in turn, did not agree with each other. In commenting about students, again the three groups of respondents did not agree on the strength of any descriptor, with students themselves and teachers both holding less favorable views of students than did parents. Similarly, perceptions of teachers were inconsistent among the three groups, with teachers rating themselves more favorably than did students and parents.

Student Responses

The next three analyses focused on groups of students. We wondered whether students' academic performance, gender, or ethnicity would generate differing opinions of the school.

In the comparison of students earning A-B grades and those earning D-F grades, students within the two groups

held consistent views. However, those students holding A-B grades tended to view the school and teachers in a significantly more positive light than did the group of D-F students.

The comparison by gender of respondents yielded both consistencies and inconsistencies of view. In terms of the school atmosphere, both groups agreed on the level of organization and peacefulness. However, males tended to view the school as staler, slower, less interesting, and less comfortable than did the female respondents. In their views of students, the groups agreed on all six categories. However, in their views of teachers, while the groups agreed on teachers' level of activity, male students saw teachers as less interested, less fair, less caring, less strong, and harder to please than did the female group.

The responses also were analyzed based on the reported ethnicity of the students. There were six groups with sufficient numbers for the analysis: African Americans, Asians/Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, Native Americans, Whites, and others. The six groups held consistent views on five of the six descriptors of the school atmosphere, agreeing on the level of organization, peacefulness, freshness, pace, and flexibility. However, Native American, White, and other students saw the school as more interesting than did their African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Hispanic peers.

In terms of their opinion of students, these groups agreed on three descriptions and disagreed on three. The six groups agreed on their perceptions of students

as attentive, busy, and friendly. However, they disagreed in response to the boredom-interested scale, with African-American respondents feeling more bored by school than did members of the other five groups. Second, African-American and Native-American students described students as significantly more passive than did the other groups. The third difference involved the smart-slow scale, with African-American students describing students as slower than did the other groups.

In their descriptions of teachers, the six groups were in agreement on five of the six categories: active, fair, caring, strong, and easy. However, they disagreed on the interested-bored scale, with White, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic students seeing teachers as more interested than did their African-American, Native-American, and other peers.

Teacher Responses

Teachers' opinions were analyzed in three ways: based on number of years of teaching experience, the number of years in that specific school, and ethnicity.

Based on number of years of teaching experience, four groups of teacher responses were considered: 0-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-30 years, and 31+. In terms of their descriptions of the school, these four groups agreed on two adjectives, the sense of freshness about the school and level of comfort. They disagreed on the other four adjectives. Teachers in the latter two groups saw the school as more disorganized than did teachers newer in their careers. Only the newest teachers described the

school as peaceful. Only newer teachers saw the school as fast, with the other groups describing it as slow.

In terms of the level of interest in the school, only the most senior teachers saw the school as more boring than did their peers. In terms of school flexibility, the newest and most senior teachers saw the school as more flexible than did their peers with 11-20 and 21-30 years of experience.

In their opinions of students, the teachers agreed on one descriptor, how "smart" the students are; but they disagreed on the other five adjectives. The two groups of newer teachers saw students as more interested, more attentive, busier, and more friendly than did their more experienced peers, who saw students as more bored, distracted, idle, and hostile. Only the newest group of teachers described students as "active," while the other three groups tended to see them as more passive.

Regarding themselves, the four groups agreed on three adjectives and disagreed on three. All groups tended to see teachers as fair, caring, and strong, as opposed to unfair, uncaring, and weak. However, the newer teachers described themselves as more interested than did their more experienced peers. Only one group, those with 21-30 years of experience, saw themselves as more passive than did the other three groups. Only the newest teachers saw themselves as strict, while the other three groups tended to see teachers as "easy."

Teachers' responses also were grouped and analyzed by the number of years in the same school, generating three groups: those with 0-10 years, 11-20 years, and 21-30 years. The three groups agreed on the level of inter-

est, comfort, and flexibility in the school. However, these groups did not agree on the other four scales. The two groups of teachers with more experience in the school tended to see it as more disorganized than did their peers, and the two more senior groups saw the school as more violent. The newest and most senior groups tended to see the school as fresher and faster than did their peers who had been in the school 11-20 years. All three groups tended to describe students similarly in the adjectives "interested," "active," "busy," and "smart." However, the most senior teachers saw students as more distracted, and the two more senior groups tended to see students as more hostile.

In their process of self-description, the groups saw themselves equally in the categories of caring-uncaring, strong-weak, and easy-strict. However, teachers with the most seniority tended to describe themselves and colleagues as more bored, passive, and unfair.

Teachers' responses also were analyzed based on the ethnicity of the respondent, generating a comparison between African-American (n=170) and White (n=420) teachers. The groups agreed on the level of the school organization, violence, pace, and interest. However, African-American teachers saw school as significantly staler, less flexible, and less comfortable than did their White peers. The two groups agreed only on the level of student activity. African-American teachers saw students as more interested, more attentive, busier, smarter, and friendlier than did their White colleagues. The two groups agreed on four of the descriptors of themselves, revealing similar views on teachers' level

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of interest, activity, strength, and strictness. However, White teachers described themselves and peers as fairer and more caring than did their African-American peers.

Parent Responses

Parents' opinions were examined based on the ethnicity of the respondent. Five groups of parent responses were analyzed. The groups agreed on the levels of school organization, peacefulness, and pace. However, they disagreed on how fresh/stale school was, how interesting/boring, and how flexible/rigid. African-American and Asian/Pacific Islander parents saw school as more stale than did the other groups. African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic parents saw school as more boring than did the other parents. African-American parents saw the school as less flexible than did other parents and, along with Native-American parents, saw the school as less comfortable than did other parents.

With regard to opinions of students, parents agreed on the strength of four descriptors: level of student attentiveness, busy-ness, smartness, and friendliness. In contrast, African-American and Asian/Pacific Islander parents thought that students were less interested in school than did other groups of parents. African-American parents described students as more passive than did the other groups. The four groups agreed on their perceptions of teacher interest, caring, and strength. Asian/Pacific Islander and White parents thought that teachers were more passive and more unfair than did

the other groups. White parents also opined that teachers were easier than other parents saw them.

Discussion and Suggestions

The findings sketched in the previous section suggest that students, teachers, and parents hold views of the school climate that often are at odds, though they agree on many points. Within each group, there seem to be subgroups that hold distinctly different views of school climate from others. For example, male and female students' views are significantly different on all items. Significant differences also are found between those teachers who are earlier and later in their careers and between parents from different ethnic groups. Perhaps that diversity of opinion contributes to the tumult of the relationships between these groups within middle schools.

These findings also support the need to bridge these differences, helping the various groups to arrive at common perceptions of school and facilitating change toward that desired end.

In the sections that follow, we present findings and, where possible, match suggestions that may focus attention on improving middle school climate.

The School

Responses were organized by seven sets of descriptors:

Organized/disorganized. Based on our results, the organization, management, and school structure seem to make "more sense" to parents and teachers than to students. Among students, only those in the A-B grade group seemed close to the perceptions of the adults; and even then the difference between the two scores was significant. Such results may imply either that students have never been informed about the overall structure and functioning of the school and see only glimpses of its organization as it applies to each of them individually or that the structure does not make sense to them. While the school holds an administrative responsibility quite distinct from its educational role, one can wonder how much involvement students do have in the implementation of either mission.

In addition, it seems that an administrative structure intended to assist students seems, instead, to bewilder them. Acknowledging the impatience of adolescents, it is understandable how such confusion regarding school administration may turn into disregard. In our results, this attitude seems most evident among those students in the D-F grade group. As marginalized students, based on academic performance, they seem further alienated from the very school structure intended to help them.

Peaceful/violent. The issue of school violence has become a serious concern. However, there is a great discrepancy between students and teachers in terms of how violent

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they believe the school to be. In that light, teachers see the school as much more violent do students. Parents ranked between these two views. While all groups can agree on the danger of those acts reported almost daily by the press, it seems that common adolescent behavior patterns may be misunderstood by teachers as expressions of intended violence. If so, some students may be disciplined for acts they regard as innocent play.

Fresh/stale; fast/slow; interesting/boring. It seems that these three categories of responses are related, based on the opinions reflected in our sample, and so we take them up together. Students, unfortunately, see the school as staler, slower, and more boring than do their parents and especially their teachers. It would appear that an organization that prides itself on creating an anticipatory learning set seems much more successful for the teachers than it is for those whose imagination and participation must be encouraged, namely the students.

Students also seem to see the school as holding little relevance for them. Were it not for the social interaction with peers, they would see little purpose in attendance.

The level of school interest also serves to separate White parents, whose rating most approximates those of the teachers, from African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native-American parents, whose scores cluster around the average for parents. In this light it seems that White parents see the school as much more interesting than do parents from other ethnic or racial groups. Such opinions are also held by the children, as White students share their parents' opinions and the children from the other cultural groups

share the views of their parents. It seems as if parents' opinions of school, and perhaps education in general, influence the value their children place on the school.

Flexible/rigid. The notion of school flexibility may integrate a perception of both the adaptability of the institution and an individual's power to influence decisions in the school setting. Our results indicate that schools are viewed as most flexible by, in descending order, White teachers, African-American teachers, parents, and then students. Again, students seem the most disenfranchised group; and student apathy could be a logical result, as students question whether any of their views or concerns are heard when the school does not seem to change to accommodate their input.

Comfortable/uncomfortable. Given the consistency of responses in the other categories, the idea of school as a comfortable place is most endorsed by teachers, especially White teachers, then parents, and finally by students. It is interesting to note that among students, those in the D-F group, not surprisingly, view school as most uncomfortable, followed closely by male students, female students, and those students earning in the A-B group. This pattern is consistent through the descriptions of the school, suggesting that those students performing poorly in their academic work, and males in general, are the most critical of the school environment.

In summary, it seems that the school is least attractive to those who are intended to gain the greatest benefit from their time within the institution. This perception is even greater for those who need the most help from the school, those students who are performing poorly

academically. The discrepancy between teachers and students would seem predictive of poor working relationships on several aspects of the teaching-learning equation. These results suggest several strategies that might be considered:

Make a whole-school commitment to becoming student-oriented. The entire faculty and staff of the school must be committed in observable ways to making the school "user-friendly." If any member of any group "opts out," their absence is felt; if any group declines to evaluate and change, the stasis remains, in spite of the best efforts of other groups (Murphy 1995).

The school may wish to convene a panel of students from all levels to review its administrative structure from the viewpoint of the "consumer." In that fashion, the input of students could be gathered and misunderstandings regarding school role and function could be addressed. The administrative structure must make sense in terms of student needs and welfare (Wendel, Hoke, and Joekel 1994). Rather than seek sullen obedience to the schools rules, educators should seek collaboration and mutual agreement on what will make the school most effective and efficient for all concerned (Seidman et al. 1994).

Attend to alienation issues. African-American dropping out or withdrawal is a function of alienation (poor teacher-student relationships) and boredom (Ford and Harris 1996). Ford and Harris describe alienation as arising from feelings of impotence, isolation, normlessness, and a lack of meaning to be found in schools. These students in our study reported significant estrangement from the school community. However, rather than just

prescribing remedies, perhaps the very students who feel discounted within the school need to be involved in investigating what seems to be missing and constructing desired strategies. That process may begin to ensure that alienated students' concerns are heard and that the school is willing to try to respond in positive ways. However, all participants must be clear on what can be done quickly, what may take more effort, and what cannot be accomplished.

See students as school "consumers." Students must be surveyed as changes occur, so that students can provide feedback and feel involved (Freiberg 1998). In most schools students are given little control over their study and learning environment. They are encouraged to be passive, dependent, and subordinate; they act rebelliously in response. Such a recursive interaction breeds distrust and apathy, rather than trust, respect, and participation in the school governance process.

Develop prevention programs. Programs of prevention are more effective than intervention efforts (Baker 1996). Therefore school leaders may wish to consider vehicles to enlist student input early in the students' careers, rather than only responding to student complaints. Focusing on student ownership of responsibility for the school, and by extension for their studies and their conduct, necessitates that educators include students in meaningful ways in classroom and school management.

Encourage family participation. Student-school interaction and family-school interaction are linked (Burks and Parke 1996; Niebuhr 1995). Most families know about the school through their children. Family partic-

ipation in the school is vital for parents to get their own sense of the school and of the professionals with whom their child interacts on a daily basis.

Begin early to involve students and parents. Waiting until a child and the school are in conflict is far too late for the creation of collaborative home-school relationships (Mayer 1995). Schools must include prospective families in their orientation process in the year *before* initial entrance, so that parents and children begin to learn what to expect. Newsletters to the parents, presentations by both teachers and by middle school students in fifth-grade classrooms (or whatever grade immediately precedes middle school) about similarities between elementary and middle schools, and a series of visits to the school prior to the fall start will help families begin the transition process. Asking families what they want to know, rather than providing only what the school wants the family to know, demonstrates the school's receptivity to parental input and willingness to try to address diverse needs.

Use peer mentoring. Middle schools need to assign older students as peer mentors for incoming or younger students (Mayer 1995). The professional literature on peer helping consistently supports the value of such a system, not only for children in academic difficulty but for all students. Educators should think of these students as "tour guides," helping new students navigate the new "world" of middle school. As in any culture, the most important mores of middle school are unwritten; and an experienced "traveler" can help others avoid common pitfalls. In addition, new students are pro-

vided with a friendly ear by one who has preceded them and survived.

Make school "smaller." Schools need to be more personal (Seidman et al. 1994). Does the school's size lend itself to creating a personalized climate, one in which at least three faculty or staff members can acknowledge each child each day? One notion of variable scheduling can keep sixth-graders in cohort groups 75% of the time, seventh-graders in cohort groups 50% of the time, and eighth-graders in cohort groups 25% of the time, with the balance of their schedules requiring integration with other students at the same level. Another option would be a "house" (or school-within-a-school) system, in which several teachers assume responsibility for a group of students, seeking to meet their academic needs "in house," supported by counseling services, and acting as advocates for their students in interactions with the larger school.

Display students' accomplishments. What educators display should reflect the accomplishments of students (Dinham et al. 1995). Elementary schools often use classroom and corridor walls to display student accomplishments. This type of display opportunity fades in middle school because students pass to different classrooms more often. However, the more that teachers can display students' work, the more connected students will feel toward the school. This effort is even more important for marginalized groups, such as students in the D-F grade group.

Model positive solutions. Educators do well to model conflict resolution strategies, effective communication, and collaborative problem-solving (Bozzone 1994). With adolescents at a developmental stage when challenge

to authority is an aspect of identity formation and differentiation, the school is faced with a "process" agenda. When all educators model these three skills (rather than relegating them to the counseling curriculum), they provide a vital learning experience for all students. As students themselves adopt these skills, they can lessen school and classroom tensions and build positive relationships with peers and others.

A point to consider is that students come to school with widely divergent models of these skills, and so educators must demonstrate openness to new ideas, values, and beliefs about involvement in decision-making (Bulach, Stephens, and Rodgers 1997). If only one style (what the teacher says) is tolerated, students will express their rebellion and disdain in ways that will interfere with their progress and may disrupt learning for other students.

Show flexibility in school practices. Students need to be able to see that changes are made based on their needs (Lounsbury 1996). At a period in their lives when they are beginning to practice responsible decision-making, involvement in classroom and school matters allows students to gain experience in offering input, acknowledging other points of view, and contributing to a decision in a win-win resolution format. The more flexibility that educators can demonstrate in school matters, the more empowered students will feel and the more responsibly they will act.

The Students

Responses were organized by six sets of descriptors:

Interested/bored. Of all six polarities, this continuum evidenced the widest gap between the perceptions of

teachers and students. Regardless of ethnicity, academic performance, or gender, students uniformly reported feeling bored by school. In fact, teachers rated their own level of interest at an average of only 3.6 out of a possible high of 6. Parents scores fell almost exactly with those of teachers.

Active/passive. Regardless of how bored students report they are, they do see themselves as more active than teachers see them but not quite as active as parents believe. However, the more years of experience a teacher has, the more passive they tend to see students and, in all likelihood, the more tasks they will assign to try to activate the students.

Attentive/distracted. It comes as no surprise to those in schools that both students and teachers agree that students are highly distracted. Regardless of any other factor analyzed, both groups see students as underinvolved in class.

Busy/idle. Regardless of how distracted and bored students are, all three groups (including parents) agree on how busy students are. That result seems contradictory to the others in this section, except to assume that students see their work as inescapable.

Smart/slow. A review of these results reveals that parents see students as smarter than students see themselves and much smarter than teachers see students. This was a category that aligned with the large-group responses, ignoring most of the other factors analyzed. One disturbing factor was that White teachers saw students as slower than did all other groups.

Hostile/friendly. Consistent with the other findings regarding students, teachers and, to a lesser extent, par-

ents saw students as more hostile than students saw themselves. There seems to be a serious gap between how these groups interpret student behavior, with adults seeing student actions as more relationship-damaging than relationship-building.

In summary, it seems that students feel disconnected from their academic environment and feel little ownership of school climate. An obvious gap exists between students' and teachers' attitudes, but both groups agree on the tedium of school, which may be an opening for dialogue on how to improve the relevance and engagement of the classroom activities. However, the discrepancy in opinions regarding the friendliness of students could derail any such dialogues; both groups need to be able to trust and accept each other before entering into discussion. These directions suggest several strategies:

Focus on self-awareness. Helping students obtain such a focus might help to narrow the gap between what students say they believe and how they behave (Ford and Harris 1996). Students' emerging metacognitive skills can facilitate the development of insight into incongruencies between their statements and actions. When pursued with curiosity and kindness, as opposed to accusation, students will respond positively to the invitation to make sense of themselves. Although this goal might be pursued best by counselors, classroom teachers can further this exploration by engaging students from a stance of puzzlement about contradictions and by disclosing their personal incongruencies. Simple communication — such as focusing on "I" messages, speaking about the present, and owning one's thoughts and

feelings — can contribute to students' self-discovery and self-evaluation.

Challenge gender stereotypes. Belief in gender stereotypes and self-esteem based on that belief can be limiting (Wigfield and Eccles 1994). Adolescents, perhaps more than children at any other age, feel constrained by gender-stereotypic traits that they may not possess. Part of the connection to each student is determining the traits and strengths of the individual and then using those as a basis for praise and affirmation.

Understand students' psychosocial and emotional stresses. While student understanding of teachers' stresses might be an ideal situation, the reality of middle school is that children's egocentricity demands that adults come to a better understanding of them, not vice versa. The developmental literature speaks volumes on the psychosocial and emotional needs of this age group. That information is important for understanding how best to work with middle school students.

Expect split loyalties. An adolescent's peer group and his or her teachers bring two sets of loyalties that often are in conflict (Kester 1994). Teachers must acknowledge the importance of peer-group acceptance and work toward "win-win" solutions when their views conflict with those of the students' peers. A win-win solution validates the importance of the peer group *and* the adult viewpoint.

Develop a student-teacher panel. Such a panel will address discipline matters, including in-school suspension (Zuelke and Nichols 1995). If the goal of conduct codes is to develop student self-discipline and self-evaluation of behavior, then students need to be involved in the

disciplinary processes of the school. Combined effort of this type is an effective teaching tool with regard to acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and their accompanying rewards and consequences.

Teach respectful questioning. Students need to be taught how to ask questions and raise points of disagreement without being "disrespectful" (Lindquist 1995). Part of the divisiveness that arises between teachers and students stems from the way in which students address teachers (and other authority figures). Part of learning is understanding how to communicate in a way that conveys respect. Teachers can help students learn how to communicate with authority figures in a mature manner that will help shape positive interactions both in school and out.

The Teachers

Responses were organized by six sets of descriptors:

Interested/bored. Consistent with the similar scale regarding students, teachers rated themselves as more interested in school than did parents and students. The newest teachers rated themselves as most interested, but it seems that teacher interest maintains itself regardless of years of experience. On the other end of the scale, D-F students, male students, and African-American students rated teachers the lowest on perceived interest. In those instances, based on the personalization tendencies of adolescents, they may have sensed teachers' interest in them and answered accordingly. For whatever reason, again the two main constituencies of the school hold different perspectives.

Active/passive. Teachers see themselves as more active than do parents and students, especially D-F students. While teacher activity over a teaching career approaches a standard U-curve, they still hold a more positive view of themselves than do the other groups.

Easy/strict. The responses in this category demonstrate the widest variance of opinion regarding teachers. On the 6-point scale, students rate teacher strictness an average of 5.1, while teachers rate themselves a 3.1. Parents see teachers as even less strict with an average score of 2.9, and White parents go even further to describe teacher strictness with an average rating of 2.1.

Fair/unfair. It will come as no surprise that the previous ratings are reversed in this question. Teachers uniformly see themselves as very fair (5.0), parents fall between the two groups (4.2), and students see teachers as more unfair (3.5). However, students, again especially male students and those students with D-F grades, see teachers as even more unfair than do their peers.

Caring/uncaring. In spite of the lower marks for fairness that they give, students still see teachers as caring, in fact as more caring than their parents do. However, female students see teachers as distinctly more caring than do male students. Teachers again see themselves in a better light than do any of the other groups.

Strong/weak. This category maintains the large discrepancy of opinion; teachers view themselves as significantly stronger than do parents or students. Again, male students and those in the lower academic group see teachers as weaker than does any other group.

In summary, teachers appear isolated from the views of those surrounding them. This is a disturbing situation. Part of any conflict in middle school may well be this discrepancy of views. These results challenge teachers to accept the views of others, which are distinctly less positive than the perceptions they have of themselves. Several strategies might be considered:

Become more self-aware. Teacher attitudes can create a chain of negative, self-fulfilling prophecies. Therefore, teachers should work to become more aware of the perceptions that others, particularly students, hold regarding school and learning. The focus of this self-awareness is the need to create collaborative working relationships that encourage growth and freedom of expression for all individuals (students and the teachers themselves).

Teachers may wish to experiment with a "strength-focused" approach to classroom instruction and behavior management, acknowledging and building on existing abilities and capabilities, rather than commenting on observed problems.

Work on making learning relevant. Tie classroom learning to students', not teachers', lives (Baker 1996). Teachers need to integrate student input into the mandated curriculum in order to build bridges between the classroom and students' lives.

Students also need to learn that many problems in real life have multiple solutions. Teachers can teach this lesson by providing opportunities for students to solve problems for which there is no one right answer. Often answers can and should be arrived at through collaboration. Teaching students how to work with classmates is an important part of making learning relevant.

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This process extends to decisions about conduct. Classroom management is best achieved by basing decisions about proper or improper conduct on students' perceptions of freedom, equality, and justice (Shechtman 1995). Teacher insistence on blind obedience robs students of ownership of their behavior. On the other hand, teaching students the principles and applications of freedom and responsibility is empowering.

Support high expectations. It is not enough merely to have high expectations of students. Teachers also must find ways to support students' efforts to measure up. Seeking student input will help promote greater student ownership of school work, and enthusiasm can grow from proprietary feelings. Whenever feasible, teachers should give students choices in assignments, again to foster a greater sense of ownership through self-determination (Hernandez-Gantes et al. 1995).

Recognize individuality. Each student is a unique being with singular learning needs (Fulk and Smith 1995). Although adolescents dislike being singled out, they often need private acknowledgment of their individuality. This need poses a challenge for the middle school teacher, who must affirm the individual student's worth without awkward public acknowledgment. Private moments with students must be differentiated from public moments.

Recognize the effects of gender beliefs. Males often feel more estrangement from teachers than do females, a finding pointed up in this study. A counterpart assumption can be that teachers have been less successful in understanding and meeting the needs of their male students. Teachers need to make an effort to understand

the gender beliefs of all of their students. Where students hold gender stereotypes, there need to be opportunities to challenge those beliefs and to help students become aware of conformity and individuality issues.

Understand issues of cultural sensitivity. Related to gender beliefs are beliefs about culture and cultural values. For example, not all students respond in the same way to public criticism. Sometimes the way in which a sanction is communicated is more important than the sanction itself (Sheets 1996). Teachers need to self-monitor to decide whether their style of discipline may create more problems than it solves or prevents.

Three effective discipline styles are positive reinforcement, explanation, and change of strategy (Tulley and Chiu 1995). Regardless of a students' cultural background, these three intervention strategies have proven to be most successful with middle school students.

Recognize inherent conflicts. Some conflicts are inevitable: order versus freedom, fairness versus flexibility, and so on. These conflicts do not disappear by involving students in classroom management (Jones and Vesilind 1995). But involving students can make the dynamics of conflict more positive than negative.

Redefine parental involvement. Parents can be instrumental in helping educators and students realize the goals of the education system. Part of the support that parents can give is in the area of student responsibility. Parents and educators can work together, if they understand one another's goals, to help students take responsibility for their conduct and, ultimately, for their own learning (Lee, Chen, and Smerdon 1996). Schools can

not dictate to parents, or vice versa. Rather, what is needed is collaboration that defines mutual needs and interests and how they can be served.

Practice collegiality. Home-school collaboration should reflect a model of professional collaboration, or collegiality. Such collegiality ensures that adults will avoid polarizing conflicts (Dinham et al. 1995). When students come into conflict with teachers (or one another), they often attempt to involve outside parties, such as their parents, other students, and other teachers. Such tempests are more likely to remain of the teapot variety when an ethos of collegiality prevails.

Summary

In this fastback we have tried to briefly summarize our study of the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents toward the school, students, and teachers. We have approached the topic of school climate as a function of consensus. The climate of a school is determined by the school's constituents: students, teachers, and parents.

Using the opinions of these constituencies that were revealed through the survey, we have tried to suggest some approaches to addressing conflicts in which two or more of the constituencies are at odds.

This study is limited in two ways. First, the use of the self-report inventory, while intended to garner responses anonymously and thereby to prompt honest input, did not measure for social desirability of responses nor for "faking bad" answers. Second, the data collection process did not link parent and student responses or teacher

and student responses. Therefore linkage among the responses is conjectural.

We do believe that the findings in this study should prompt educators (and future researchers) to consider the interactive nature of the opinions and attitudes of these constituent groups. Too often, educators address school problems from the viewpoint of teachers, or of students, or of parents, without fully considering the ramifications of their combined attitudes. All participants in the middle school endeavor must have a voice and feel ownership in the process if a positive school climate is to be realized.

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